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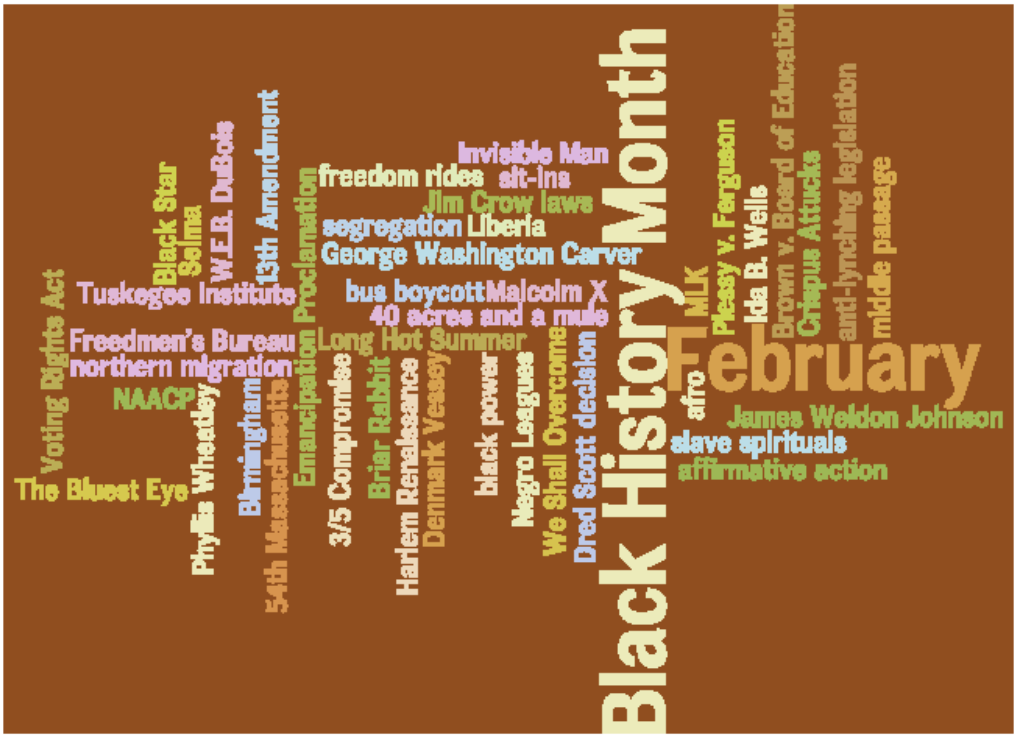
Torch (January 2009)

Brandon Baldwin

Civil Rights Team Project

THE TORCH
CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

January 2009 Newsletter Editor: Brandon Baldwin



Like the look of the first page of *The Torch* this month? These word collages are a wonderful way to make text and concepts visually appealing.

If you are interested in creating your own "word clouds" go to:

www.wordle.net

And if you can't quite see the Wordle creation here, click on the following link to see a nice, crisp, clean copy:

www.wordle.net/gallery/wrdl/415459/Celebrate_Black_History_Month%21

The Oak Hill High School CRT has created some wonderful t-shirts by taking words from the CRTP's mission statement and putting them in Wordle. Great idea!

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February Is Black History Month

I didn't want to do it. I told myself that I wouldn't write anything about Black History Month for the January *Torch*. There weren't any special write-ups for GLBT History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, American Indian Heritage Month, or any other "months". That was not oversight; it was intentional. The idea has always been to focus on *all* of these issues *every* month. One month devoted to a cause is great, but what about the other eleven months in the calendar year? What happens then? (This brings to mind GLSEN's No-Name Calling Week, a wonderful program, but you can't help but question the title. Is there only one week of the year when name-calling is unacceptable? What about the other fifty-one weeks of the year?)

Just last month I praised the Maine State Museum for the way they incorporate ethnic and immigrant history into all of their exhibits. That has always been the strategy with *The Torch*: make every issue inclusive and representative so that special monthly celebrations like Black History Month need no mention.

And so… after finishing a three part series on important issues of race in America, I found it unnecessary that the January *Torch* highlight Black History Month. But here I am writing about it anyway. How come? Well, because it makes sense. With limited time and resources, your civil rights teams aren't able to address everything. With Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Black History Month coming up, this is the ideal time of year to address issues of race.

So let's call this the incredible and inevitable pull of popular demand. (Also known as the "You've Got to Give the People What They Want" Theorem.) Many of you have mentioned that your teams are planning events around Black History Month; it makes sense to have some ideas here in *The Torch*.

That said, here are three recommendations for teaching Black History Month:

1. Try moving away from the Big Three of Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Kids are always quick to mention these three names when it's time to discuss Black History Month or black history in general. Of course all three of them are important Americans, and there are wonderful resources available on all three. But students, and adults, need to know that there's more to black history than Tubman, Parks, and King. How much do you know about Phyllis Wheatley, James Weldon Johnson, Benjamin Bannaker, Nat Turner, Ida B. Wells, or Shirley Chisholm? If you're like most Americans, not much. It's time to teach and learn about some black Americans other than Tubman, Parks, and King.

This has been made easier in recent years, as there are more and more options available in multicultural education. There are many children's books published about prominent and important black Americans whose names aren't Tubman, Parks, or King. Here are some recommended biographical titles:

- *A Picture Book of Thurgood Marshall*, by David A. Adler
- *Phillis's Big Test*, by Catherine Clinton
- *Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells: The Daring Life of a Crusading Journalist*, by Philip Dray
- *The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights*, by Russell Freedman
- *Delivering Justice: W.W. Law and the Fight for Human Rights*, by Jim Haskins
- *Henry's Freedom Box*, by Ellen Levine
- *Richard Wright and the Library Card*, by William Miller
- *Carver: A Life in Poems*, by Marilyn Nelson

For more information on any of these titles, you should visit our website at:

www.civilrightsteams.org

2. Keep it local!

Of course we always strive to make our teaching relevant. One of the best ways to make history relevant is by making it local. People are inherently interested in almost anything that happens locally. Students are no different. If you've ever had the privilege of showing a video that happens to mention Maine or sharing a story that mentions a nearby town, you know this. Student faces light up with recognition and the learning suddenly takes on a different air.

Most Mainers are unaware of our own state's black history. The common assumption is that there isn't any, but that's not true. Black History Month is a wonderful opportunity to confront these misperceptions and look at the black history right here in our state.

This isn't an easy task. Maine has never had a large black population. Local history can be a choppy and messy affair, especially when looking at the history of a small minority population that the dominant culture traditionally ignores.

And yet in the past five years, it has become much easier to study and appreciate Maine's black history. The Portland Freedom Trail (see the October *Torch*) opened in 2007. H.H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot completed a comprehensive history of Maine's black history in 2006 entitled *Maine's Visible Black History*. The book includes contributions from 42 different authors and offers a detailed look at the history of black people in our state, from past to present.

Finally, there's a beautiful young adult novel chronicling an ugly piece of Maine's racial history. Gary D. Schmidt's *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* takes place in Phippsburg in 1912, when the community shamefully ousted the black and native population of Malaga Island to make the town more appealing to tourists. The book was exceptionally well received when it came out in 2005, named as a Newbery Honor book and winning the ALA's

Michael L. Printz Award. The praise is well warranted.

3. Understand the Necessity, but also the Shortcomings of Black History Month

Black History Month should never be a feel-good month that satisfies the need for multicultural education with a one-week lesson on a few prominent African Americans. It's important to understand why it was originally conceived, and why it's still necessary today. Black History Month is necessary because otherwise, most students don't learn much of anything about black history. And black history is an important part of our country's history, something all of our students should learn.

But is one month enough? Of course not. Learning about black history for just one month is what critics call the "tourist approach" to multicultural education. It's similar to visiting a foreign country and taking in the tourist attractions. On the surface it's tempting to think that you know that country, but how much of it have you really seen? Is this an authentic experience? Is one month of black history an authentic educational experience?

One month is not enough, but for many, it's one month more of black history than they'd otherwise get. By understanding the necessity and shortcomings of Black History Month, though, we can improve our own education. Black history is important. Learn it and teach it all year.

Web Links and Resources:

The Smithsonian has compiled some impressive teaching resources to celebrate five different heritage months: Black History, Asian Pacific American, Women's History, Hispanic Heritage, and American Indian Heritage.

www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/resource_library/heritage_resources.html

To hear the O'Jays "Give the People What They Want" (a pretty good civil rights song) go to:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFq9PEOukCg

To check out *Maine's Visible Black History*, go to:

www.visibleblackhistory.com

An absolutely terrific book that looks at the shortcomings of the average American history curriculum is James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. It is an eye-opening read that educates and infuriates. Check it out at his webpage, where you can even read the introduction, at:

www.uvm.edu/~jloewen/liesmyteachertoldme.php

Finally, how about some old school 80's rap? Listen to KRS-One, one of hip hop's most respected lyricists, rhyme about black history in Boogie Down Productions' "You Must Learn". There's a delightful silliness to the video, but it's quite thoughtful, too. Check it out at:

www.dailymotion.com/video/x26bep_boogie-down-productions-you-must-le_music

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Why Black History Month?

This activity is designed to get students thinking about Black History Month and why it exists.

Start off by having students make individual lists of important Americans they have learned about. Give them a few minutes to complete these individual lists, and then have them work together to create one group list.

Once the group list is complete, look at how many of the people listed are black. Challenge students to list more prominent and important black Americans. There's a good chance that they will only be able to come up with a few: Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks.

(If you wish to do another list, ask them to come up with European countries and then African countries. In spite of the fact that there are about ten more African countries, that list will probably be shorter.)

At this point, let them know that February is Black History Month, which is the topic for today's activity. Black History Month is celebrated every year because most Americans haven't learned much about black history. (The previous activities should highlight this.)

Questions for students to consider:

- Why don't we know more about America's black history?
- Why is it important to learn about America's black history?
- Is Black History Month a good way to learn about America's black history?
- Are there any problems with celebrating Black History Month?

For younger students, the answers to these questions will probably be pretty simple and straightforward. That's OK, because these are probably issues they haven't thought much about. Older students, however, should have a much more thoughtful response to these questions.

The point of the activity is to encourage thought. There are no outcomes or conclusions, but simply important questions designed to get students thinking about why Black History Month is on the calendar every year. You are encouraged to do as much or as little with these questions as you want.

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Barack Obama and Multi-Racial American Identity

Editor's Note: This is the fourth and final installment in our three part series on race in America. That is not a misprint… the Obama election continues to illuminate interesting and important issues.


Obama's parents: Barack Obama, Sr. and Ann Durham

Perhaps you've heard that later this month, America will inaugurate its first black president. It seems like ridiculous understatement to call Barack Obama's electoral victory an important moment in American history. Many long-held assumptions about race in America have been challenged, and some shattered, through this election.

Most of the analysis of Obama and the 2008 election, however, focuses on race from a simple black and white perspective, ignoring the fact that Obama is biracial. While America is well aware that Obama has a white mother and black African father, there has been little discussion and analysis focusing on both aspects of Obama's dual race identity. How come? And what is the significance of Obama's election from a multi-race perspective?

First off, it's interesting how it is almost universally accepted that Obama is black. How come, when he has one white parent and one black parent? It could be the vestiges of an insidious old idea, the one-drop rule. The one-drop rule was a system of laws aimed at maintaining racial purity and boundaries. It simplified racial identification: rather than relying on physical appearance, the one-drop rule looked at ancestry. Black ancestry, no matter how remote, determined one's racial status as black: just one drop of black blood was considered enough.

This system of racial classification was obviously racist, as the underlying assumption equated black blood with contamination. There was no one-drop rule for white racial classification: one white ancestor wasn't enough to make someone white, because that would be compromising white racial purity. Interestingly enough, there was no one-drop rule for Asian or Native American racial classification, either. But black blood was somehow akin to a dominant gene in one of Mendel's peapod experiments, cancelling out all other racial ancestry.

The one-drop rule was an important institution in slave states and the Jim Crow South, but it was even used in the U.S. Census until 1960, when Census respondents were first asked to self-identify their race. The laws may be off the books today, but the logic of the rule seems to persist. American society seems to allow individuals to self-identify their race to some degree, but this is less likely with black ancestry. In the eyes of America, if you

have black ancestry, you are by definition black.

We see this today with Barack Obama. His mother was white, his father was black, and yet America identifies him as black. Is this the persistence of the one-drop rule?

It could be. It certainly raises some important questions about racial identity. Who decides? In the early days of the election, Obama was asked about his racial identity amidst criticism that he wasn't "black enough" and therefore might struggle to win black votes. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Obama said, "If I'm outside your building trying to catch a cab, they're not saying, 'Oh, there's a mixed race guy.'" In other words, Obama was "black enough" to win black votes, because people see him as black.

Does this mean that society dictates your racial identity? That was certainly true with the one-drop rule in the past, and Obama's quote indicates the influence that outsiders have in dictating someone's race, especially when that someone is considered black.

But why can't individuals craft their own racial identity? Ask Tiger Woods. When he won the Masters at age 21, the media was quick to crown him the Great Black Hope in the sport of golf. Then a funny thing happened: Woods went on Oprah and announced that he's "Cablinasian."

What? Cablinasian? The media mocked his new racial identification category… how dare he! But Woods was merely giving name to his complex multiple-race identity. The word combines Caucasian, black, Indian, and Asian. His father was half black, one quarter American Indian, and one quarter white; his mother Asian. Woods was simply trying to credit all the aspects of his racial ancestry, but people were eager to classify him in more simple terms. Today's conventional wisdom maintains that Woods is a superstar African American athlete, leaving some to wonder why he isn't credited with being the world's first superstar Asian golfer.

But maybe you're wondering why Woods has to be anything other than what he wants to be. Why can't Woods self-identify his race? Perhaps it's just the complications of mixed race identity. We like classification because it simplifies things. It's easier to label someone as black, white, Asian, or Native American than it is to analyze their racial ancestry or explain the meaning of new words like "Cablinasian".

But the world is changing. Tiger Woods and Barack Obama are prominent multi-race individuals, a growing demographic group that is challenging long-held assumptions about race and making racial classifications increasingly ridiculous. America's multi-race population is growing, and these issues will become more salient in the years to come.

So why is this happening? First of all, more people are embracing all the different parts of their racial identities. Past practices of racial classification may not indicate it, but America has always been a country of racial mixing. It is estimated that 75-90 percent of black Americans have white ancestors, and about 25 percent have Native American ancestry. Many white Americans would probably be shocked to discover that their own racial lineage isn't as simple as they might expect, either. (In fact, there are now companies that provide a service where they

are able to analyze human DNA to determine people's racial ancestry. The results are frequently surprising, revealing that many Americans are unaware of their own racial lineage.)

Of course another factor in America's burgeoning multi-race population is the increase in interracial relationships. What was once taboo is now socially acceptable, and this should only increase over time. It's hard to believe it, but it was only in 1968 that the Supreme Court ruled anti-miscegenation laws illegal. That means that as recently as 40 years ago, it was illegal in some states for interracial couples to marry. (And it was only in the year 2000 that Bob Jones University lifted its ban on interracial dating.)

The U.S. Census has reflected this demographic shift. In the past, the only options for racial identification were White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Other. Individuals who identified as more than one race had to choose: pick one aspect of their racial identity, or identify as "Other." Starting with the 2000 Census, however, individuals now have the option of identifying as more than one race.

As America's multi-racial populations continue to grow, we will grapple with important issues of racial identification. It has always been said that race is a social construct, something that we create. As individuals create their own names to reflect their racial heritage and self-identify racial classifications on U.S. Census forms, it becomes more and more apparent how accurate that idea really is.

Web Links and Resources:

An AP article on Obama's racial identity:

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20081213/ap_on_re_us/obama_s_not_black

An article from MSNBC about increased interest and attention on multi-racial Americans with Obama's election success:

www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24542138/

An intelligent article on Tiger Woods and his "Cablinasian" racial identity:

www.salon.com/april97/tiger970430.html

NPR's *Radiolab* recently featured a one hour show on issues of race, delving into the scientific vs. social aspects of racial classification in particular. To listen to a podcast of this episode, go to:

www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2008/11/28

Other websites on multi-racial identity:

www.ameasite.org
www.mixedheritagecenter.org
www.projectrace.com
http://mixedraceamerica.blogspot.com

And finally, two wonderful short videos on our Moodle site about multi-racial identity:

"Something Other Than Other"
"Sugar Water"

If you check out anything from this month's *Torch*, make it these two videos. To view them, go to our site and click on Resources, then Films, then Short Films. They are located near the middle of the list.

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Why Does America Equate Muslim with Anti-American?

While doing some research on multi-racial identity, I found some comments Colin Powell made about Barack Obama's presidential candidacy on *Meet the Press*. I remember hearing Powell's thoughtful and powerful response to the insidious rumors that Obama was a Muslim and thinking, "It's about time!" While Powell's *Meet the Press* interview may be old news in terms of the election, his defense of Muslim Americans remains relevant and refreshing.

An extended excerpt from the interview:

"I'm also troubled by [people saying] 'Well you know that Mr. Obama is a Muslim.' Well the correct answer is 'He is not a Muslim, he's a Christian, he's always been a Christian.' But the really right answer is 'What if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?' The answer is 'No. That's not America.'

"Is there something wrong with some 7-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she can be president? Yet I have [people] drop the suggestion [Obama's] a Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists. This is not the way we should be doing it in America.

"I feel strongly about this particular point because of a picture I saw in a magazine. It was a photo-essay about troops who were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. And one picture at the tail end of this photo essay was of a mother in Arlington Cemetery and she had her head on the headstone of her son's grave."

"And as the picture focused in you can see the writing on the headstone. And the awards, Purple Heart, Bronze Star, showed that he died in Iraq, gave his date of birth, date of death. He was 20 years old. And then at the very top of the headstone, it didn't have a Christian cross, it didn't have a Star of David.

"It had a crescent and a star of the Islamic faith. And his name was Karim Rashad Sultan Khan. And he was an American, he was born in New Jersey, he was 14 at the time of 9/11 and he waited until he can go serve his country and he gave his life."

All credit to Colin Powell for standing up and defending Muslim Americans against the thinly veiled assaults on their religion and patriotism. The picture he referenced in the interview offers powerful testament to the idea that America is more than just a Judeo-Christian nation, and shatters the myth that there is something inherently un-American in the Muslim faith.

Powell's comments seem particularly relevant given some of the anti-Muslim incidents from the past month. There have been numerous examples of Muslim women told to remove their hijab head scarves in courtrooms. The hijab is an important part of their religious faith; being asked to remove it can be akin to sacrilege.

A Georgia woman was recently asked to remove hers. Stories differ on what happened next, but the incident seems like an example of anti-Muslim prejudice and/or a lack of understanding of the Muslim faith.

The local police department, however, seems to be responding appropriately by requiring sensitivity training. Hopefully it's not of the touchy-feely variety, and gives law enforcement some understanding of cultural differences and how they affect their work.

Read about the Georgia courtroom incident:

www.cnn.com/2008/US/12/22/georgia.muslim.courthouse/index.html

And then there were the nine Muslim passengers who were denied flight on AirTran airlines. They had all paid for their tickets and boarded the plane, but were reported to authorities after other passengers overheard what they thought was threatening conversation. The FBI cleared them for travel, but AirTran still denied them their flights.

This sounds like yet another example of the post-9/11 crime of Muslim while flying. Airport security and other passengers profile Muslims and anyone who might appear Muslim as potential terrorists.

Read about the AirTran incident and their response at:

www.cnn.com/2009/US/01/01/family.grounded

www.cnn.com/2009/US/01/02/family.grounded/index.html

Finally, it's worth checking out CNN's i-Report, where users are allowed the opportunity to post their own content. Right now, in response to the courtroom and AirTran incidents, users are sharing stories about their experiences wearing religious garments.

www.ireport.com/ir-topic-stories.jspa?topicId=167604

This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.

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